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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MADRID 000515

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [CU](#) [SP](#)

SUBJECT: INCREASED SPANISH ENGAGEMENT WITH CUBA

REF: BRUSSELS 0555

Classified By: Political Counselor Kathy Fitzpatrick; reason 1.5 (B) and (D).

1. (C) Summary. Regional leader and Socialist Party (PSOE) President Manuel Chaves touched off a minor political scandal when he announced in Havana that King Juan Carlos and President Zapatero would make official visits to Cuba in 2006. Representatives of both the King and President Zapatero disclaimed the announcement and said they had no plans to visit Cuba. The MFA Cuba desk officer insisted that Chaves was either misinformed or acting on his own initiative, but did confirm GOS plans to increase high level contacts with the Cuban Government. GOS Development Minister Magdalena Alvaro will travel soon to Havana for "routine meetings" and Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque will visit Madrid in March (at Cuba's request). Looking ahead, Fidel Castro is invited to the Ibero American Summit in Spain in October, though he has not indicated whether or not he will participate. The GOS believes Castro is in a wait-and-see mode in the wake of the EU's decision to temporarily lift its restrictive measures on Cuba, though Spain expects Cuba will release a large number of political prisoners in the next several months.

2. (C) The MFA does not expect dramatic improvements in Cuban behavior as a result of EU overtures, but Spain is determined to improve ties with the GOC in order achieve small gains, such as the reopening of the Spanish Cultural Center in Havana. In our discussions, we have emphasized the USG's continuing skepticism regarding the Spanish approach and noted that Cuba will remain an issue of contention in the bilateral relationship. The GOS hopes that we will accept Spanish policy as complementary to USG Cuba policy, a point MFA DG for Latin America Javier Sandomingo is likely to make during his upcoming meeting with WHA A/S Noriega. We do not believe the GOS will shift from its course on Cuba over the near term, a course driven by a mixture of commercial interests, lingering romantic notions of revolutionary Cuba within the Socialist Party, and naivete regarding Spain's ability to influence Castro. End Summary.

//SPANISH REGIONAL LEADER STUMBLES IN HAVANA//

3. (C) Poloff met with MFA Cuba desk officer Pablo Gomez de Olea on February 7 to get a readout of the February 5-6 visit to Havana of Andalucia Regional President Manuel Chaves and to encourage the GOS to follow through with its announced plans to increase contact with the Cuban opposition. Chaves, who is also President of the ruling Socialist Party (Zapatero is Secretary General of the PSOE), was the first significant EU political figure to visit Havana since the EU's suspension of its restrictive measures on Cuba. Chaves met with Fidel Castro as well as with opposition leaders and touched off a minor scandal for informing Castro that King Juan Carlos and President Zapatero would make official visits to Havana in 2006. Both the Royal household and the President's office denied any such plans, but most political observers doubt Chaves would have raised the possible visits without authorization/instruction from the GOS.

4. (C) De Olea insisted that the MFA "had no information" of plans by either the King or Zapatero to go to Cuba and suggested that there may have been a misunderstanding on Chaves' part. He said he had not received a readout from Havana of Chaves' visit, but that the MFA was pleased that he had met for 45 minutes with dissident figures Manuel Cuesta Morua, Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo, Oswaldo Paya, Elizardo Sanchez, and Vladimiro Roca. According to press reports, Chaves relayed the Spanish Government's new policy on Cuba. Chaves told the press that he found the opposition to be "divided... lacking unity and cohesion."

//INCREASED HIGH LEVEL EXCHANGES//

5. (C) De Olea confirmed Chaves' announcement that Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque would travel to Madrid in March for meetings with GOS officials. He said the meeting was arranged at Cuba's request and that the Spanish did not expect anything to come from the meeting. De Olea also said that Spanish Development Minister Magdalena Alvarez will travel soon to Havana for a "routine working visit" with Cuban officials which would not involve any new Spanish aid initiatives. (NOTE: Though de Olea did not mention it, Chaves also urged Castro to attend the Ibero American Summit

in Salamanca, Spain in October. END NOTE.)

16. (C) De Olea said Spain believes that Castro is in a wait-and-see mode with respect to the EU and said the GOS does not expect dramatic changes in either EU-Cuban relations or in Cuba's political environment. He does expect the GOC to release significant number of political prisoners in the next few months in an effort to maintain forward momentum in relations with Europe. For its part, the Spanish Government plans to use the next several months to cautiously begin discussions with the GOC on the key bilateral issues. During the Perez Roque visit, Spain will press for improved Cuban servicing of its debt to Spanish entities and for increased counter-terrorism cooperation. De Olea did not elaborate on the latter item, but it is most likely a reference to Spain's desire for greater Cuban cooperation regarding Spanish investigations of ETA members who reside in or travel through Cuba.

//ENGAGEMENT AT ANY COST//

17. (C) Poloff requested details regarding Spain's plans for ramping up contact with the opposition, as the GOS said it would do to counter-balance the easing of EU measures against the Cuban Government. Poloff also reviewed USG suggestions on possible options for increased engagement with Cuban civil society, which we had previously shared with Spain and other EU members. De Olea was familiar with the USG suggestions and said that many coincided with Spain's ideas on how to provide tangible assistance to Cuban activists.

18. (C) With this in mind, De Olea said the MFA is focused on getting Cuban acceptance for the reopening of the Spanish Cultural Center in Havana, which was closed down by the GOC in September 2003. De Olea said he now favored acceding to a standing Cuban demand for GOC oversight of the Cultural Center's events and the right to veto any programs it finds objectionable. He said it was more important to give the Cuban public access to international news and other outside information than to maintain the full independence of the Cultural Center. (NOTE: It is not clear whether others in the MFA would also be willing to give the Castro Government such a degree of oversight of a theoretically Spanish institution. END NOTE).

19. (C) Poloff asked whether MFA DG for Latin America Javier Sandomingo would travel to Cuba for discussions with the opposition, as he had been planning to do for several months. De Olea said that Sandomingo would likely not travel to Cuba soon, admitting that the Cuban Government refused to allow him entry since his agenda would include meetings with dissidents. De Olea argued that such a visit was no longer necessary since Manuel Chaves had met with the opposition during his recent visit. There are no GOS plans for reciprocal impediments on official Cuban travel to Spain.

//SKEPTICISM OF SPANISH APPROACH//

110. (C) Poloff noted that the USG remained disappointed with the EU's decision to suspend its restrictive measures since Castro had done nothing to merit such an overture. In our view, Spain's leadership of the move to ease the EU measures, combined with the increased high level exchanges between Cuba and Spain, virtually ensured that Cuba would remain a significant irritant in U.S.-Spain relations. The USG hoped that MFA DG Sandomingo would be able to discuss concrete Spanish successes in support of Cuban democracy activists during his February 14 meeting with WHA A/S Noriega.

111. (C) Poloff explained that there was particular skepticism within the USG regarding the willingness of the Spanish Ambassador in Havana to Havana to undertake measures to support dissidents, given his obvious preference for working with the Cuban Government. De Olea said the Spanish Government was well aware that EU diplomats in Havana tended to fall prey to the "Stockholm Syndrome" and said that most of the hard work in support of Cuban dissidents would not be undertaken by local EU diplomats. However, local EU diplomats, including Spanish diplomats, would be expected to "faithfully execute EU policy" with respect to aiding the opposition.

112. (C) De Olea said he hoped the USG would understand the Spanish approach and give the GOS time to let their engagement effort bear fruit. According to de Olea, one benefit of EU plans for engaging the opposition is that they would force the opposition to speak to the EU with a single voice, improving coordination among the fractious organizations. Poloff lauded this goal, but noted that many respected dissidents declined to participate in such artificial unions because of the Castro regime's extensive use of infiltrators and double agents, with several purported leaders being among the prime suspects. De Olea acknowledged this danger as significant impediment to any effort to aid the opposition.

//COMMENT//

13. (C) GOS disavowals notwithstanding, it seems likely to us that Chaves had explicit authorization from the Zapatero Government to float the possibility of a Zapatero or Royal visit to Havana next year since increased engagement with the Castro Government is clearly a Zapatero/PSOE priority. The GOS will likely continue on this course despite friction with the USG over the issue. Spanish engagement with Cuba appears driven by a combination of factors, including pressure by Spanish investors in Cuba to improve the Spanish Government's ability to lobby on their behalf. More importantly, Zapatero remains focused on drawing a clear distinction between his policies and those of former President Aznar. Improving relations with Castro satisfies both this objective and the desire of his leftist constituency to repair ties with a leader many in Spain continue to view as a revolutionary hero. Finally, FM Moratinos and other GOS officials seem genuinely convinced that Spanish engagement with the GOC will allow them to wield increased influence with Castro and his successors. The fact that Spain has made concession after concession to Castro with little to show for it has so far not dispelled this illusion.

MANZANARES